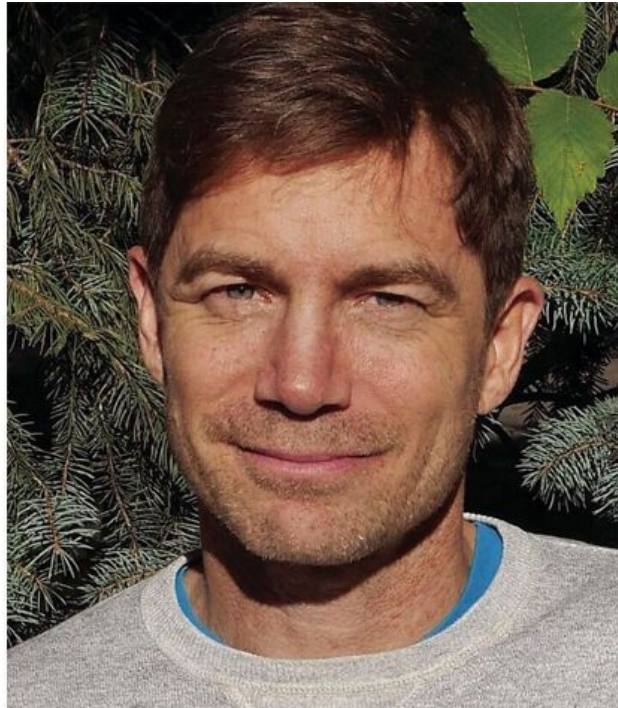


Writers on the Range: What also counts is where the snow falls

February 1, 2023



This week Writers on the Range explores the possibility of dangerous flooding in the Colorado River Basin. But there's something more to think about: What if the U.S. Agriculture Department's forecasting weather mechanism has a giant blind spot?

SNOTEL, an automated system of snowpack measurement, is run by the Agriculture Department to monitor water levels during the winter. Almost all its sites are located at high elevations.

Three years ago, on Feb. 20, 2020, Durango journalist Jonathan Romeo, reported that the nearby San Juan Mountains registered an "average" snowpack. Mid and lower elevations, however, were bare, "with no measurable snowpack."

That year, "average" wasn't a helpful predictor as runoff was only 54% of normal, due to a hot May and not enough "low snow."

The SNOTEL sites in Colorado range from mid-8,000 feet of elevation up to the mid-11,000s. McClure Pass, elevation 8,774, near my hometown of Paonia, shows 15.1 inches of water equivalent, which is 170% of normal.

Overall, the snowpack for the Colorado River Basin is 135% of normal.

A recent series of storms illustrate that. Jeff Givens, who's known locally as the "Durango Weather Guy," reported 49 inches of snow in his neighborhood of Durango West, which sits at 7600 feet of elevation, after snowstorms January 17 and 19. But measurements in nearby Silverton at 9,200 feet, only 40 miles away, show that only 20.5 inches fell.

Durango Weather Guy's predictions this year have all come with the notice: "We're seeing greater accumulations at mid and lower elevations than high." Given there is a huge amount of low and mid-elevation terrain and lots of snow, raises chances for a big spring flood.

Dave Marston is the publisher of Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West.